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How the Russians Cause a Nuisance By Their Presence

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UNITED NATIONS, N.Y.

WHEN the Reagan Administration ordered Soviet missions to the United Nations to cut their personnel, United States officials said the missions were used for espionage and the resources of the Federal Bureau of Investigation were strained by monitoring the movements of so many potential spies. How much damage the order will do to U.S.-Soviet relations was not imediately clear. Moscow said it would not help the mood of the summit that is to be held in Washington this year or early next yearm, but did not threaten to cancel the meeting. While the diplomats pondered, the F.B.I. kept tracking suspected spies.

Indeed, with only 1,135 agents in the New York City area to cover all types of crime, it would be impossible for the F.B.I. to monitor all 275 diplomats, secretaries, and others attached to the missions and the more than 600 other Soviet citizens who work officially as United Nations employees, trade representatives and tour operators. Washington wants the number cut to 170 in two years. "We have to prioritize," said John L. Hogan, head of the F.B.I.'s New York office, "and we hope we're covering the targets that are the most critical to national security."

In New York, keeping tabs on potential spies presents its own problems. To lose a tail, a target can easily pop into the United Nations buildings, which are off-limits to the F.B.I. and New York City police unless there is an official United Nations request. "The U.N. is pretty much a sanctuary," said James M. Fox, the special agent who heads the counterintelligence unit that watches Soviet citizens. "Fortunately," he said, "there are friendly people inside the U.N.."

Rather than watching individual Soviet targets, counterintelligence agents rely more on "spider webs," that is, on watching potential meeting spots, although high-level targets are still followed and subject to electronic surveillance. When Iona Andronov, a 48-year-old correspondent of the Moscow-based Literary Gazette, was assaulted by two men while trying to cover a United Mine Workers strike in McCarr, Ky., last September, an F.B.I. counterintelligence agent on his tail rescued him.

The bureau works closely with the Office of Foreign Missions, an arm of the State Department created to impose restrictions on foreign missions in the United States on the basis of national security and treatment of American personnel abroad.

Personnel at several embassies and missions, including the Soviet ones, are required to request from the United States Mission permission to travel beyond a 25-mile radius of New York, and they must book all hotel, train and plane reservations through the Office of Foreign Missions, which also approves their purchases of telecommunications and construction equipment. Written requests must be submitted at least 48 hours in advance, along with forms that provide such information as the purpose and method of travel, departure and arrival times, travel routes, and the names of passengers. About 20 percent of the United States, including such areas as the Mississippi River, Hawaii and Silicon Valley are always off-limits to Soviet citizens.

Obeying Orders

Two years ago, when a foreign official with permission to travel was caught speeding on the New Jersey Turnpike, he refused to obey a state trooper's order to leave the highway because it was his approved route and he was not authorized to take other roads. He got off the turnpike and took an unauthorized route only after police summoned a truck and crane to haul his car away. Last Mother's Day, when the Cuban mission, whose employees' travel is also restricted, organized a picnic near North Tarrytown, just inside the 25-mile-limit, the cars left in a long convoy so that no one would get lost.

Even if the Soviet Union makes the required cuts in personnel, which they charge are illegal, it is questionable whether this would crimp their intelligence activities. Before the end of the year, the Soviet Union is expected to open a consulate in New York, and the office of Aeroflot, the Soviet carrier, is also scheduled to reopen. And the American order will not restrict the number of temporary Soviet personnel assigned to United Nations functions, including the four-month General Assembly every fall. Said the F.B.I.'s Mr. Nolan, "While I think the reduction in numbers can help, the net loss won't be as big as it looks."

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